

Architecture and Eclecticism

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ABSTRACT

Some architects and clients are happy with Eclectic architecture that individuals have recently found sympathetic as an environment for home life. The aim of this paper is to trace the history of eclecticism and also give account for cultural attitudes that rejected the qualities of architecture it has produced.

Keywords: *functional beauty, eclectic ideology, theatricalism, dishonest architecture, authenticity*

INTRODUCTION

The Eclectic saw himself as a participant in a reform movement that had restored taste and literacy to architecture. The Eclectic felt free to introduce variations of his own to suppress typical ornamental details and to create original ones; to substitute a new material for an authentic one, by skillful adjustment of the elements and by careful detailing he could create something original, relying on his sense of how the style worked well. At the same time the past was edited. Some recent buildings in Egypt used historic decorative motifs for picturesque effect, without regard to correctness, while using the historic styles as expressions of various cultural institutions. No journal or even any photographs were referenced to show the architect the true look of what he was trying to imitate. Today we condemn this; we are annoyed at what seems to be a betrayal of historic truth. We see a sentimentalism of the newly rich. Why instead of being an Eclectic, was not the architect original and true to the reality of his own contemporaneous Egypt? The problem rather was to decorate the perforations and cap the box itself becomingly, and historic architecture had a thousand competent ways of doing both.

HENRY RICHARDSON

Henry Richardson was an individualist, not to be confined to a style or ism, but he managed both to be in the forefront of the Aesthetic movement in America and to create its first Eclectic work. He developed the style of the Romanesque, in his buildings with their finely colored stonework that had been smoothed to a hard surface; it was a rugged rock faced random ashlar, a material then associated with engineering masonry rather than architecture. Richardson's designs were a sort of compromise between Romanesque and Gothic and Richardson Romanesque became a formidable rival of Gothic for churches.

This was in building of the Trinity Church in Boston begun in 1873. The truly Eclectic feature was the crossing tower. When he was worried about the stability, La Farge in 1874 was in Spain around this time and sent Richardson a photograph of a crossing tower in Salamanca that suggested a new solution, one in which the walls would rise sheer and be capped with a great octagonal pyramid.

ECOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS

In the mid-nineties The Ecole des Beaux-Arts had been the model, and it had become fashionable to study there. Its curriculum was primarily for the French student making French art a standardized high-quality product at the service of a mid-Victorian revival. Then came the mansard roofs, the rustication, the columns and entablatures standing boldly forth from the wall, of the most sumptuous Victorian Second Empire. But while that had been a rather lean style, slightly somehow the Beaux-Arts favored the big, broad gesture. Reaching back into French architecture as far back as Francois I, it assembled motifs in a way which, if they never violated axial symmetry, had almost Queen Anne looseness. Slightly overdone was the essence of its very real charm. Ionic columns were a little too thick, and from their Roman volutes depended unnecessary strings of husks. The mansard roof swelled, and an elaborate chapeau at its curb created as fancy a skyline as the cast iron of the mid-Victorian counterpart. Frivolous young ladies, eight feet high, stood on ledges, holding wreaths or blowing post-horns. French windows with sinuous

tracery that may have been a discrete not to. Art Nouveau opened onto balconies supported by massive, heavy sculptured consoles.

Ernest Flagg, the most skillful user of the style refined it again into something truly urbane, playing off over scaled voids and under scaled ornament, much of it wrought iron, in such a way that they balanced handsomely. The inerrable hotels, apartment houses, town mansions, loft buildings, and theaters in Beaux-Arts seem warm by contrast, offering their proliferation of heavy ornamental trinkets for admiration; they mingle an endearing jollity with their grandeur.

The architect depended on the help of artists who could anticipate his wishes. The major Eclectic building called for a union; above the cornice and sculpture outside was need to recall historic worthies. The Five classical orders are accepted by classicists throughout history and gave enough inspiration. Immigration from Italy provided stone-workers, mosaicists terracotta workers, and craftsmen to execute the fine details of the new buildings. A boom to architects who wanted great interior spaces was that of Rafael Guastavino, a Catalan engineer who modernized traditional tile vaulting, for use in modern construction. Many of the Roman domes, Gothic vaults, and geometrical staircases of the Eclectic period were built by Italians.

As the Beaux-Arts influence died away, the grand parade of allegorical sculpture and fresco tapered off but certainly did not stop. Heroic allegory, though, became only one manner among several. Theaters, restaurants, and commercial buildings were decorated increasingly with themes of Italian gardens, forest glades, carnivals or harbor and industry-places and occasions dedicated to the creation of wealth or the enjoyment of leisure. With artists like Frank Bran Gwyn and Barry Faulkner the painter treatment became more impressionistic and the palette more brilliant – or at least not so dark and powerfully molded as it had been with Blashfield and Cox. Sculpture became more stylized, less concerned with anatomy and clothing and more with a lively summing-up of the figure.

THE COLONIAL REVIVAL

The Colonial Revival, begun as another ingredient, a Queen Anne variant, in the Aesthetic mix that had begun in 1897 as a style in its own right. A withdrawal from the picturesque became common. In spite of reliance on the past the house remained a house of the nineteenth. The symmetry was perfected, the proportion corrected, the style purified, and the Colonial Revival became popular. After 1910 a serious and learned style the Neo Georgian, became increasingly popular for houses, churches, and schools and building of every sort. It became evident that facades, decorations should conform as a general rule, to someone historical style. French windows opened from light, airy halls onto terraces, and stairs with wrought iron balustrades led outward to long, paneled bedroom corridors.

Around 1915 the great period of classical urban architecture began to come to an end. Commercial architecture was the first to break with the prevailing classicism. At first medieval styles seemed to offer great promise, with their precedents of masses raising behind masses, but in the long run it seemed best to find new forms.

GOTHIC REVIVAL

The major alternative to a classical style was the Gothic one, and by 1915 a large amount of very polished Gothic had been executed mainly for churches and educational institutions, as well as in academic buildings, town halls, and commercial buildings and even in houses. But commercial architecture was the first to break with the prevailing classicism. The palazzo skyscraper of 1900, a prism of space filled to whatever level the owner wished, had gone too far in New York, and the zoning law of 1960, in order to allow a minimal amount of light and air into the streets, imposed a ziggurat – like form possibly with a central tower, once walls on the property line had reached a certain height. A classical ziggurat was possible, but their effect was almost bound to be awkward and architects began to look for ways to treat the many setbacks necessary to use all the allowable space in a more positive way.

The Gothic Cathedral dramatizes its structures with shafts, clustered around the piers, that support absolutely nothing and ribs that are often totally unnecessary. Gothic seemed to demand buttresses, pinnacle, towers-insistent verticals and irregularities of perimeter out of keeping with the plain, spreading, low-walled preaching spaces that was usually required. Romanesque, on the contrary, could dispense with the gesture of a tower yet gain a fine effect through great roofs, a few doorways and large windows, and a few small scaled, rippling arcades.

Gothic was not popular for commercial architecture, and yet there were attempts to use it, especially for very tall buildings where classical horizontality presented problems, and two of the most famous skyscrapers of the Eclectic period were in the style. The first was the Woodworth building by Cass Gilbert, completed in 1913. Flemish Gothic realized in cream-colored terra cotta, it stressed the vertical with hardly a dissenting line. In place of cornices, it used Ogival Lambrequins, slightly projecting like the canopies of choir stalls, and a shaft rose from lower, much broader masses. The second was the Chicago Tribune Building by Hood and Howells. Their design was a polished, rather academic, Gothic, owing much to the Tour de Beurre of Rouen Cathedral.

The suburban house

Beyond the formal Gothic of church, school and business building, that might be called classically romantic, lay the more amorphous romanticism of the suburban house. The role of the building industry as the architect's helper had been developing steadily during the Early Eclectic period. A good plasterer could trowel in a half-dozen ways to give the proper textural effects for each style. Artfully chipped slates, skintled bricks, and purposefully wrapped roofing tiles were available for the romantic suburban house. Samples of brickwork laid in mortar and bound up in metal straps, lay about in architect's offices and swatches of stone arrived in the mail.

Even new decorative materials suggested new forms. This was particularly true of earth materials. Tapestry brick which came into use some time before 1910 gave the architect a large range of shades and colors to choose from in a ruggedly textured brick, either of normal proportions or elongated like Roman brick. By preference tapestry brick was laid

up in thick mortar, often mixed with an aggregate of small pebbles so that a rich, variegated surface resulted. Fancy bonds were often used to create panels in the areas of plain wall, and inlays of tile at accented points were often used as substitutes for the usual carved and molded ornament. Terra-cotta also flourished.

Victorian period monumental classicism was always regarded as proper for any official, and formulas were early adapted or invented that persisted through the 1930's despite the decline of Eclecticism. By 1920 it was no longer fashionable for a family. A rambling Tudor house for example, with a grandiose hominess about it executed in a painterly mixture of fieldstone, half-timber, and artfully variegated and rough-edged slates with exposed surfaces diminished from eaves to ridge in the Old English manner, came to seem more desirable. The less wealthy favored a Cotswold cottage, a modest stuccoed Italian villa that might have urns on the gate piers and putti over the front door, or a fragment of a Norman farm-house or chateau with a great hipped roof.

Because Colonial and Early Federal were classical, they represented exceptions, though very popular ones, to the prevailing romanticism. Often virtuously humble affairs of shutters and pent eaves, they sometimes appeared in a more august mode, which was conceived as a steadily minuet than as a Baroque fanfare. Practitioners such as Samuel Sloan and Frank Furness had dominated the scene with designs that were good but had, in full measure, the mid-Victorian hardness; Furness was famous for a strident Gothic mannerism.

Church Architecture

This at least, is the way things were in secular architecture. Church architecture was another matter. Here, the problem was to catch the spirit of, and to match in excellence, the medieval masters. Secular, classically oriented architecture had its own decorum but offered the artist more freedom, more neutral space in which his work could display itself. In church circles Charles Conic is known because his stained glass studio was still active and another artist in stained glass Nicols D'Ascenzo, as well. Samuel Yellin is remembered by a few veterans of the old architectural offices. But how much Yellin ironwork is rescued from the smelter when a church goes down? Gram envisioned a

place of worship where the arts would gather, but how much of the art, except perhaps the church building itself, has received any serious attention outside narrow ecclesiastical circles since 1940? Today the church artists of the Eclectic period are merely a subject for an *ubi sant*; but who can say that a new way of seeing will not come, when art lovers will make Eclectic church crawls to inspect pulpits and stained glass?

City Buildings

The factory and the tall buildings were reinforced concrete cages, filled with the very maximum amount of glass in most of their panels. Engineers who felt the need to qualify this starkness in some way floundered, all too obviously. Certain city buildings such as department stores, small office buildings, and automobile sales rooms clad their similar cage work in ornate cream terra-cotta or tapestry brick, but the cages of industry, either for economy's or because of their less desirable locations, compromised either with a blatantly false front, usually classical with no architectural treatment whatever behind or with a few bits of traditional ornament, a cornice included, scattered over the meager solid areas. The cage pattern was too strong to permit any real success with traditional forms, however, and a sort of free style, using inlay of tile and slightly fanciful parapets, became the expedient way out. Little of this, old or new in style, was very satisfactory.

Then there were concourses subway stations, the low platform shelters that were the successors of the Victorian sheds, and later on the bus stations and airport buildings, areas where people were in the move, where easy circulation and maintenance were important, and where plans and proportions were hostile to traditional compositions. Ceramic, concrete, and steel were the materials used in such places, and though the exteriors might be treated in a traditional style, the newness of the program invited and often got a new approach.

MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

Variations on the Doric order, pseudo-rustication, and so on were common enough, but some considered the inherent shapeless massiveness of concrete and its talent texture as promising bases for experimentation and like Frank Lloyd Wright at Unity Temple, washed the surfaces freed from the formwork with acid to expose the aggregate or nailed

moldings inside the formwork itself to shape it in new, simple forms. Steelwork was half-heartedly tamed when close to the public eye.

The modernists, affected to believe that the new constructional methods and materials should be used frankly, and regarded any attempt to cover or coax them into conformity with the Styles as dishonest, and therefore bad, architecture. Their basic theory is appealing. Let the steelwork, the reinforced concrete of the bridge, the skyscraper, the factory show forth unadorned; let the strong clean lines establish new, vital primitive forms for architecture, even as polished machine parts might evoke new forms in sculpture. If there was strength in these things, why shy away from them merely because of the newness of their forms. In the search for new forms, nevertheless, Sullivan, Wright, and the Prairie School architects were not wholly alone. Frederick Scheibler (1872-1958) produced a number of handsome apartment houses and homes, much influenced by avant-garde Austrian and German architecture of the pre-Gropius period.

Though, engineering is indifferent to geometrical elegance an expedient balance of performance, time, and money is what counts. The bridge that creeps across the river on bents is usually cheaper and quicker to build than one that takes the void in one flying leap, the concrete cage of the factory may be best with ramps, brick superstructures, and proliferating ductwork, for the matter, not all machinery surfaces were presentable, around 1930, at the Museum of Modern Art. Functional beauty then is an occasional coincidence in modern engineering rather than the necessary result of letting the engineer has his own way.

To obtain that beauty infallibly, artistic judgment, not serve practicality, is needed. Moreover, architecture including that admired by and that produced by the modernists, has always presented an edited version of the constructional facts. Coming closer to Gropius and Le Corbusier who finish off brick or rubble walls with white cement, as if to suggest concrete of some seamless industrially produced sheeting, while Wright pads out his Prairie Houses chimneys and reverses Corbusier practice by veneering the concrete walls of the Imperial Hotel of Japan in hand-made brick.

The Eclectics, of course, deviated much further from the realities of construction to attain preconceived effects, and often cultivated as well a deliberate archaism of materials and workmanship. Perhaps Geoffrey Scott offered them moral support in the first instance. And they probably regarded the rejection of machine-age resources, aesthetic aside, purely as an affair between the client and his bank account, if he too, liked granite columns turned on giant lathes in Vermont or married English roofs of rough-edged slating diminished, course to course, from caves to ridge, why force pilotis and asphalt on him? If the modernists believed in facing the facts albeit with cement stucco or hand-made brick, the Eclectic wanted rather to create a pleasant experience, not without a gentle cultural message in his buildings.

Art Deco, even Modernistic, had for the Eclectic an emulsifying function, allowing him to be modern without disorientation; not only were these styles fluid enough to be fitted to buildings of unprecedented dimensions and proportions, but could retain the symmetry, the density and placing of ornament, and the massing, derived from the masonry tradition, that he was used to.

Art Nouveau, its forerunner, had had a small vogue, and of course Louis Comfort Tiffany had even contributed to it. And it is reasonable to assume that some smart shops had always followed the latest French modes, even in their decorations. The Barclay-Vesey Building of the New York Telephone Company already includes Art Deco ornament of stylized plant and animal motifs finished in 1926.

THE 1920S

The twenties was a peculiar decade, full of rigidity, and revolt, and a yearn for the new. Much of what was modern around 1925 was not too different from some of the things Suanne had done over a hundred years earlier, but the simplification of traditional motifs seemed new once again. Art Nouveau influenced Austria and Germany. Suggestions from the Works of Wright, came to America with its fountains, its super imposed blossoms, its symmetrically leaping impalas, and its stylized human figures about the time that the French themselves were moving into a more abstract, more geometrical manner.

Le Corbusier built his Villa Stein at Garches in 1927, and in the same year his double house at the Stuttgart Exhibition, an event that also saw important work by Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe and that, some feel, was the place where the International Style crystallized out of the recently matured works of these architects. In the same year, Versune architecture (towards a New Architecture).

In America, Neutra, not long in the United States of America, planned the Lovell health house which was in execution at that time. Buckminster Fuller exhibited the first Dimaxion house. Norman Bel Geddes, a stage designer of avant-garde tendencies (stage design had to some extent conditioned audiences to new, stripped-down forms), became in 1927 one of the first industrial designers, possibly the first as to call himself. He was quickly followed by Raymond Loely. Henry Dreyfuss and others. This new profession was soon to challenge the architect and the engineer by shaping buildings as well as machines.

CONCLUSION

Architects were already in a turmoil occupied with the question of modernism and what form it should take to cultivate brilliance in design especially some Eclectic work by architects who have gone too far with their theatricalism, not architecture design with one façade Colonial and the other Gothic for harmony's sake, threatening the art of architecture itself. A stern judgment was laid upon those who had designed Eclectic architecture. Eclecticism was dishonest architecture for dishonest people, if not honest.

The great waves of immigration from Italy, and elsewhere long over, and the craftsmen who executed the dwelling of an Eclectic building were increasingly likely to be second generation. Eclectic architecture lacked something in their proportions, detailing, and materials that might have brought to life. The failure may have been more one of artistry than anything else. But after 1930, there was too often a feeling that a cheap looking pediment or pointed arch was better than none at all.

The attempts to compromise with new demands by including features from modern architecture – big windows, informal masses made matters all the worse; at the same

time, the most talented architects became modernists by education introduced a sort of Eclectic ideology in the Golden City (Doubleday 1959). Henry Hope Reed exhibited contrasting details from Renaissance and modern architecture and offered a theory of the history of architecture since the mid-nineteenth century. Robert Venturi has written favorably of the compositions of an Italian Eclectic, Amando Brazini, and in his learning from Las Vegas (M.I.T. 1972) he points out the symbolic significance of such Eclectic devices as the window shutter.

The question is now; Does a new and a revitalized Eclecticism may someday come into being to allow its continuing existence to be legitimized? Perhaps only if a cogent theory to support it! Eclecticism is like a person who has almost lived down an ancient world; and is regarded now as old and harmless. Eclectic architecture nonetheless created possibilities for visual experience that go beyond fashion and are still valid.